Heather Huyck

# Placing Women in the Past

Historic places tell us who we are as a people, and where we have come from. Omitting any significant portion of our history distorts all of it. A few years ago, people wanting a national park in Natchez, Mississippi, approached the Chairman of the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands. They wanted a park that preserved the glories of the antebellum south. He argued that "the whole story"—specifically including blacks, both slave and free, must be preserved and interpreted. That "whole story" must include everybody if we are to have a history that can help us understand our predecessors and ourselves.[1] It must include the whole human race, including the female half. Or as Gerda Lerner once wrote, "the majority finds its past."[2]

In 1826, the Chief Factor at Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, John McLaughlin, officially reported only two women and two children living there.[3] A richer range of sources estimates that a few years later "approximately 210 men, about 160 women and perhaps 210 children" were there.[4] McLaughlin was apparently overlooking all the non-European women.

Tangible history helps us "uncover" all women's presence, by beads, awls, patent medicine bottles, or pink-painted rooms. Only by "uncovering" the lives of all women—their perceptions, contributions, experiences, and interactions with the rest of humanity (men)—can the whole story be told.

*Clara Barton House, Glen Echo, Maryland. Looking East.(Prints and Photographs Division,Library of Congress, 1979)*

Cultural resources are simply tangible history—remains from the past we can see, touch, even smell, hear, and taste.[5] History books tell us about the past; historic places with their tangible history evoke the past. Their sensual qualities connect us to that "foreign country" of the past[6] Making connections, helping us place our lives into a larger and longer context—that's what history is all about. Such connections can be comforting—reminders that our predecessors dealt with equally intractable problems as we do. They can also be deeply disturbing—seeing the geography of the slave landscape with its perverse owner-enslaved gender relations is painful. Tangible history bridges past and present, created historically but experienced now.[7] As such, it is particularly useful in women's history.

This issue of *CRM* focuses on women's history as found in tangible resources, in landscapes, in structures and artifacts, **in places of the past**. The articles here link women's history and tangible history in a number of different ways: preserving places, interpreting places to the public, researching places, and commemorating places. They show some of the diversity of women's history, whether as state and local sites, as properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places, as National Historic Landmarks, or as national parks. Together, these articles show how far we have come in understanding women's lives through historic places, and how very much further we have to go.

"Placing Women in the Past" seeks to use tangible resources to retrieve women's history and to suggest ways that preservationists, researchers, and interpreters can learn from and teach about that history. Three basic principles inform this effort:

- that women **were there**, both physically and by influences often stronger than recognized;
- that we need to uncover their diverse experiences using historic structures, sites, and objects, sometimes by removing the overburden of the intervening years and often by removing our own blindfolds;

- that tangible resources of historic places provide resources for both researcher and public to understand more about our past.

Twenty-five years ago, women's history was limited to the story of women suffragists getting the right to vote. Embryonic women's history courses used *Century of Struggle* and *Up from the Pedestal,* both focusing on political rights. No National Park Service units specifically preserved and interpreted women's history.

Few primary sources had been identified. Today, women's history encompasses much more. New primary sources and re-readings of older sources, such as the *Women's History Sources Survey*[8] (now in need of revision itself), oral histories, innumerable dissertations, articles, and monographs have increased the sources and references available to anyone interested.[9] An analytical framework has evolved, providing intellectual rigor and guidance.

The very understanding of women's history has been greatly expanded and redefined (as has political history itself). Women's history is no longer confined to suffragists, but is much broader; no longer limited to upper-class New England white women, but moving toward truly including all. Studying women as a group, while also discovering their wonderful diversity, poses its own challenges. As historians have delved more and more into women's pasts, they have recognized that there is no more one experience of women than there is one of men! Women's history has become engrossed with changing cultural definitions of gender and gender roles, and with understanding how those definitions are created and enforced.

Today, women's history recognizes that while some women went west, others went **north** from Mexico, and others went **south** from the Bering Land Bridge. The sheer variety of women's experiences fascinates us (using the singular "woman's" obscures that diversity). Women have been "found" most everywhere. Those quintessential individualists, the fur traders, trapped their way west with considerable assistance from Native American women, lifesaving links for their survival.[10] In those rare places where women were not much present, they were still actors influencing the past. Wives, left behind in "the states" in difficult legal limbo, financed their Gold Rush-husbands seeking their fortunes in California.[11] Women have also been "found" in previously unexpected roles. Some accompanied their captain-husbands on square-riggers, such as San Francisco Maritime's *Balclutha*. In 1899, the captain's wife, Alice Durkee, attended by an Indian midwife, gave birth to Inda Frances Durkee on the voyage from Calcutta to San Francisco.[12] Labor history, once limited to paid work—a definition never appropriate for the enslaved African American who built so much of this nation's foundation—now includes unpaid labor, in-the-home-work, as well as work that crossed the domestic-public boundaries. Colonial Pennsylvania women's butter production made significant financial contributions to their families.[13] Immigrant women toiled on New York City's Lower East Side making cigars, candy, and paper flowers. Women whose husbands worked in the steel mills and the mines kept boarders, mixing commercial activities with domestic ones.[14]

### *Finding and Preserving Sites*

A decade ago, an NPS "parlor game" tried to identify sites bereft of women's history—assuming that such sites existed. The former federal prison on Alcatraz Island, now part of Golden Gate Park, in San Francisco, seemed most likely. But no. The wardens' families lived on the island and female relatives visited the men incarcerated there.[15] That the National Park Service accepts women's history more is apparent in its revised outline of American History.[16] National Park Service sites can easily be divided into three categories: places that focus on women's history, places that include women's history, and places that surprise us with women's history. In the first category are those five sites specifically preserving and interpreting women's history—all biographical except for Women's Rights National Historical Park; in the second, those sites such as Lowell NHP, Mesa Verde NP, and Homestead NM, where women's history should be inescapable; and in the third, all the battlefields, the presidential and Great Men sites, as well as the predominantly "natural" parks, where women's history has been too little recognized.

In the past few years, with considerable effort expended, new historic sites that preserve and interpret women's past have been found.[17] In 1992, Page Putnam Miller completed the National Historic Landmark Theme Study in Women's History and published *Reclaiming the Past: Landmarks of Women's History*.[18] Her work added 39 designated National Historic Landmarks specifically preserving women's history. But the actual preservation and interpretation of those sites remains problematic: Mother Jones' West Virginia "prison" was recently demolished. Women have worked mightily to save places associated with women's history.

### *Reinterpreting Existing Sites*

Various house museums, historic sites, and museums have reinterpreted existing historic places to uncover women's history.[19] Key examples include the Smithsonian's thoughtful reinterpretation of the First Ladies' Hall, and *From Parlor to Politics: Women and Reform in America*.[20] The

Bureau of Land Management's National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center in Baker City, Oregon, opened in 1992, superbly integrates women's history into Trail history.[21]

### *Places for Research*

Increased interest in women's history has created an outpouring of scholarship. That scholarship has used myriad kinds of written records (and a few oral ones), but few tangible resources. Research in tangible resources combines written and oral research with archeological and ethnographic, curatorial, and architectural analysis. Historian Jane Nylander used domestic artifacts and images to analyze "the intersection between reality and reminiscence in...everyday life in New England during the years 1760-1860," a topic fraught with females.[22] Kenneth Ames explored Victorian objects—hall stands, sideboards, needlework mottoes, parlor organs, and furniture suites to examine latter-19th-century culture and gender roles.[23] Slave history, lacking first person written documents, has used artifacts creatively.[24] Elizabeth Collins Cromley's *A History of American Beds and Bedrooms, 1890-1930* and Ruth Schwartz Cowan's *Coal Stoves and Clean Sinks: Housework between 1890 and 1930* each uses tangible history to understand gender roles.[25] The research opportunities remain significant.

### *Issues*

Places of history share issues with the written record—the bias toward structures and artifacts created by the wealthy with the financial means to have more durable goods and homes.[26] Because many places and objects preserved are associated with the rich and powerful, with genealogical overtones (whether of individuals or, in the presidential-related sites, of the nation), they have a strong bias against being critically analyzed.[27] History and inheritance sometimes clash. Fully including women's history challenges the standard periodization and significance of American history that is so focused on military and political events rather than demographic, social, and economic trends. Barbara Clark Smith argues that "All of us who work in 'technology' museums... might lobby our institutions to deal responsibly with the technology so significant—both by its presence and its politically determined absence—in many women's lives: birth control."[28] Sometimes women's history challenges ideas of preservation. Some preservationists questioned whether the simple concrete block house of novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was worthy of landmark designation, or the house where labor organizer Mother Jones was imprisoned had adequate physical integrity.[29] In the past few years, much interpretation of women's history for the public has been domestic—cooking in open fireplaces, sewing—at the risk of inadvertently portraying women's roles as more limited than they actually were. Controversial and non-popular events continue to be avoided.[30]

Today, we face two major challenges—ensuring the preservation and interpretation of already identified sites, continuing to find more appropriate sites, and reinterpreting existing sites; and knitting tangible history and women's history together. Each of these goals has much to contribute to the other; both are needed if we are to tell The Whole Story.

(For Notes, see p. 57.)

---

*Heather Huyck, NPS Director of Strategic Planning, is a cultural historian long interested in women's history and cultural resources. Her mother, Dorothy Boyle Huyck, began researching the history of NPS women over 20 years ago.*

*Grant-Kohrs Ranch House parlor (1988) showing the historic configuration of the room created by Augusta Kohrs around 1895. All objects, except the curtains and shades, are original to the Kohrs family. The top of the small footstool is petit point by Augusta; and its feet are cattle horn. (It is one of the few places one can see a trace of cattle in the house.) It is said to have won a blue ribbon at the 1879 Montana Territorial Fair. Augusta may also have done the turkish chairs with needle point bands down the middle and the chair scarfs.*

*The ranch is now a National Historic Site for the purpose of providing "an understanding of the frontier cattle era of the nation's history." Augusta arrived here as the 19-year-old bride of Conrad Kohrs. She cooked, cleaned, milked cows, made soap and candles, roasted coffee, ran the house, and began to raise a family. The furnishings she acquired over decades were reportedly the finest available. Photo courtesy Jonna Mehalic.*

booklet which will include information about the six honorees, the other women nominated, and the historical context of their lives and work.

The Massachusetts Legislature allocated funds toward the project under the auspices of the Massachusetts Cultural Council. The Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities (MFH), affiliated with the National Endowment for the Humanities and supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council and private sources, was asked to manage the project and to help raise matching funds. The MFH is a marvelous organization which supports a wide range of excellent public humanities programming—forums, conferences, lectures, documentaries, exhibits, history projects, and more. Every state has a humanities council which could undertake such a project.

The Foundation organized a successful kick-off event on October 22, 1996, and is now managing a campaign to raise the necessary matching funds. In December 1996, a Steering Committee was organized to oversee the project's implementation, which should take two years. The Steering Committee will convene a Public Art Selection Committee to oversee the process of defining specifications of the artwork, soliciting proposals from artists, reviewing their ideas, and choosing final candidates to complete their work with preference given to Massachusetts artists. Simultaneously, the Foundation will develop an educational booklet by soliciting essays from noted Massachusetts historians and women's studies specialists. The Foundation will also produce an interpretive brochure as a companion to the mural to provide visitors with information about the mural's content and history. The Foundation expects to develop programs after the project's completion to keep its spirit alive.

To find out more about this project and how your state or municipality might undertake a similar project, please write or call Ellen Rothman at the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, 46 Temple Place, Boston, MA 02111, phone 617-451-9021.

---

*Martin Blatt is Chief of Cultural Resources and supervisory historian for Boston National Historical Park, Massachusetts.*

# Placing Women in the Past

**Notes, continued from p. 6.**

1 Congressman Bruce F. Vento, Chairman of Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands, meeting with citizens of Natchez, Mississippi, Washington DC, April 1988.

2 Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1979).

3 John A. Hussey, "The Women of Fort Vancouver," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 92:3, Fall 1991, p. 265.

4 Ibid. p. 278.

5 Tasting the past is generally available or recommended except as reconstructed in living history demonstrations. Many years ago some NPS people tried Gold Rush champagne—it didn't taste good. Personal communication, Dianne Nicholson, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, 1996.).

6 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985).

7 Jules David Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?" in *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture,* edited by Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1993), pp. 2-3.

8 Andrea Hinding, Ames Sheldon [Bower] and Clarke A. Chambers, eds., *Women's History Sources: A Guide to Archives and Manuscript Collections in the United States* (Bowker, New York, 1979).

9 For a good synthesis, see Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (The Free Press, New York, 1989).

10 Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK, 1980). See also John Hussy, op cit.

11 Linda Peaky and Ursula Smith, *Women in Waiting in the Westward Movement: Life on the Home Frontier* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman and London, 1994).

12 See Stephen Haller, *Families at Sea: An Examination of the Rich Lore of "Lady Ships" and "Hen Frigates", circa 1850-1900* (National Maritime Museum Association, San Francisco, 1985). Haller estimates

that one quarter of the merchant marine ships included the captains' families on board.

13 Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1986), especially "The Economics of the Butter Trade" analyzing the female contribution to family farm income through butter production.

14 See Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (1910; reprinted by University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, 1974).

15 "Alcatraz Cellhouse Tour" (audio cassette produced by Antenna Theater, Golden Gate National Park Association, San Francisco, no date).

16 See *History and Prehistory in the National Park System and the National Historic Landmarks Program* (National Park Service, Washington, DC, 1987 edition); *Revision of the National Park Service's Thematic Framework* (National Park Service, Washington, DC, 1996). For a history of women associated with the NPS, see Polly Welts Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice: A History* (University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1996).

17 "Preservation News: Lost" in *Preservation: The Magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation*, January-February 1997, p. 13.

18 Page Putnam Miller, *Reclaiming the Past: Landmarks of Women's History* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992).

19 See Robert Sullivan "Evaluating the Ethics and Consciences of Museums" in *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*, edited by Jane R. Glaser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1994), pp. 100-107 for excellent list of questions to identify gender bias in exhibits.

20 See Edith P. Mayo, "New Angles of Vision" in Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums edited by Jane R. Glaser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1994) for a summary of progress in including women's history—and its lack—in museums.

21 See also Susan G. Butruille, *Women's Voices from the Oregon Trail: The Times That Tried Women's Souls* and *A Guide to Women's History Along the Oregon Trail* (Taramack Books, Inc., Boise, ID, 1993).

22 Jane C. Nylander, *Our Own Snug Fireside: Images of the New England Home, 1760-1860* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994) p. ix.

23 Kenneth L. Ames, *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1992). See also *Dining in America: 1850-1900*, Kathryn Grover, ed. (The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst and The Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum, Rochester, 1987).

24 See *Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South*, edited by Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr., with Kym S. Rice (The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, and the University Press of Virginia, 1991). John Michael Vlach, "Afro-American Domestic Artifacts in Eighteen-Century Virginia" in *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1991). See also Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia" in *Material Life in America, 1600-1860* (Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1988).

25 See Elizabeth Collins Cromley, "A History of American Beds and Bedrooms, 1890-1930" and Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "Coal Stoves and Clean Sinks: Housework between 1890 and 1930" in *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*, Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, eds. (University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville TN , 1992).

26 See Kevin M. Sweeney, "Furniture and the Domestic Environment in Wethersfield, Connecticut, 1639-1800" in *Material Life in America, 1600-1860* (Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1988), pp. 261-290.

27 Mark P. Leone and Barbara Little, "Artifacts of Expressions of Society and Culture: Subversive Genealogy and the Value of History" in *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* edited by Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1993), p. 174.

28 Barbara Clark Smith "Applied Feminist Theories" in Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums edited by Jane R. Glaser and Artemis A. Zenetou (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1994.) p. 144. She also argues that "women's impact on museums [must] not be limited to treating women's history and women's artifacts, but also include locating men's history and men's artifacts in their partial and gendered context." p. 145.

29 See Barbara Melosh, "Women and the Arts" in Page Putnam Miller, *Reclaiming the Past: Landmarks of Women's History* (Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1992), pp. 73-74. On "Mother Jones" see Lynn Y. Weiner "Women and Work" in Miller, op.cit., pp. 208-209. *Preservation News, the Magazine of the National Trust for Historic Preservation* reported under "Lost" " Mrs. Carney's Boarding House, Pratt, West Virginia: site of union activist Mother Jones's imprisonment by the state, torn down by owners." January/February 1997 issue.

30 See Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History & Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums* (University Press of Virginia, 1992).

---

Special thanks to Sharon Brown, Stephen Haler, and Charles Clapper.